



URBANITY AND MODERNITY IN THE POETRY OF NISSIM EZEKIEL

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ABSTRACT

Nissim Ezekiel is considered as one of the foundational figure in post-colonial India's Literary history for Indian writing in English. He was a modern poet by virtue of the time he was born in and in which he wrote his poetry. Many of his poems from different collection deals with the modern urban life. The present paper attempt to highlight the theme of urbanity and modernity in different poems of Nissim Ezekiel. Ezekiel as a true modernist poet, view poetry in close connection with society and emphasized man as the focal point in the universe. While developing the themes of urban wickedness and ugliness, love and marriage, family and human relationship, alienation and searches for the identity of the modern man, he advocate a cultural synthesis of the ancient and modern. Ezekiel thus tries to depict the harsh reality of modern and urban life, while presenting reality he, appears to be a stern realist. He has graphically painted in vivid picturesque words and phrases a vast gallery of portrait representing Indian urban life. Thus, he is a preacher of modernism and almost all the modern features of poetry find expression in his poetic creation.

INTRODUCTION:

Nissim Ezekiel was an Indian Jewish poet, actor, playwright, editor and critic. He was born on 16 December 1924 in Mumbai in Jewish family. As an Indian English poet, he occupies an important place in post-independence Indian English literature. He has written many volumns of poems- *A Time to change* (1952), *Sixty poems* (1953), *The third* (1959), *The Unfinished Man* (1960), *The Exact Name* (1965) and others. His plays *Nalini*, *Marriage poem*, *The Sleep-Walkers*, *Song of Deprivation* and *Who Needs No Introduction* are already staged and published. He also wrote a number of essay, which was published in magazines and papers. He was an editor in chief in several journals to encourage people in writing poetry, plays and criticism. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his poetry collection *Later-Days Plsam*, by the Sahitya Akademi. The theme of his poems mostly deals with urban and modern life. The poetry of urbanity and modernity means vigorous experiments of the breakdown of cultural continuity rather than cultural vigour. Modern poetry is the poetry of revolt against tradition and there is experiment, ephemeral and puerile. Modernism often stresses freedom of expression, experimentation, radicalism and even anthropological primitivism. The subject of the modern poetry is the common man's life, dilemmas, environment, surrounding, daily business of living, enjoyments etc. It also present the conflicts and frustration of the people. Theme of Urbanity and Modernity in nissim Ezekiel poems: Nissim Ezekiel felt a sense of alienation in the world around him. The sense of oppression in a crowded civilization represented by Bombay city is one of the most recurring themes in his poetry. It is the "Bitter native city" (Hymns in darkness) where the poet was born and brought up. As a modern poet, his poetry gives impression of an oversensitive soul caught in the tentacles of a cruel city, unable to escape from its vagaries and consequently developing a love-hate relationship with its tormentor. Most Indo- Anglian poets have dealt with the oppression, inertness and decay of city life. Particularly, the city of Bombay has become a tantalizing symbol of the bitterness and decadence of urban life India. The impact of the city's growing and decaying civilization on the consciousness of these poet has produced some of the most telling Indo- Anglian poems. The poets, one and all, have developed an ambivalent attitude of love-hate towards the city and have been unable to escape its several seduction. Poets like Amit choughury, Abhanjan K. Mishra, Dilip Chitre and Aroop Mitra have expressed shock and disgust at the growing dehumanization of the city. In their poems, several dirty faces of the city appear with horrifying clarity—its dust and din, pushing and jostling unceasing traffic, strident noises, dubious night life, philosophy of live and kill and above all the animalism, greed, jealousy and littleness of its inhabitants. Nissim Ezekiel present, like any other Bombay poet, present a comprehensive picture of the city. At once realistic and ironic. The poem "Background Causally" express the tra- vails of an intelligent Jew boy of "meager bone" living and growing up in a multi-religious and multi-linguistic urban society where he was so frightened that, "One noisy day I used a knife". In "The Edinburgh Interlude" (1983) Ezekiel wrote, "I have become part of the scene which I can neither love nor hate". He lived through a "life of cheerful degradation normal in my neighbourhood" until a mature awareness ensconced him. In spite of his disgust with the futilities of the sprawling city, Ezekiel made a commitment to choose Bombay as his residence, which is reflected in most of his poems. 'Urban' is a poem of eighteen lines exploring the divergence between the Bombay man's search for the nourish dream of a free, oppressionless existence and his perennial inability to achieve even a partial realization of it. He does not get to see the skies, never welcome the sun or the rain; his morning walks are dreams floating on a wave of sand. "He knows the broken roads and moves In circles tracked within his head". (Col- lected poems; Urban'). The dichotomy between man's hopes and achievements in the distressed city is suggested by the metaphor "broken roads" and "circles".

The disgusting reutilization of everyday life, the resulting jack of coordination between action and perception and the sense of futility of human effort to dis- cover meaning in hope are the outcome of the tyranny of the city over the citizen. The dilemma of the poet who desperately tries to disown and reject the city which 'burns like a passion' is touchingly expressed in 'Urban'. Like Yeats in the "Lake Isle of Innisfree", the poet here longs for a quite habitation away from the kindred clamour" of the wild city. But all his dreams of solitary morning walk and vision of the far away hills, the beach and the trees are thwarted by an overwhelming passion that turns the traffic of his mind to urban chaos. In "City Song" there is a reluctant acceptance of the ways of the city. From the terrace of a friend, the poet watches the city just as a repentant debauchee returns to his seductress at her sight. A "Morning Walk" is a great poem which translate the sense of the bustle of the "barbaric city" into a gnawing pain that oppresses the poet's memory. The pic- ture of the city deprived of humaneness, seething with poverty, dirt, noise and bus- tle emerges with disturbing clarity in his poem.

Barbaric city sick with slums,
Deprived of seasons, blessed with rains,
Its hawkers, beggar, iron-lunged,
Procession led by frantic drums,
A million purgatorial lanes,
And child-like masses, many –tongued,
Whose wages are in words and crumbs.

The finer emotion and the paralysis of will the Bombay man suffers from is suc- cinctly suggested by a chain of metaphor. The "cold and dim" city is his purga- tory. The cold garden on the hill, the morning breeze and the hedges cut to look like birds are the symbols of Bombay man's unattainable hopes. The poet ques- tion why. "His native place he could not shun, The marsh where things are what they seem?" (collected poems, A Morning Walk). One of the earliest influences on Ezekiel was T.S Eliot. In spite of unquestioned originality Nissim Ezekiel "A Morning Walk" compels comparison with Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. Eliot theme is the drabness of European civilization immediately after the First World War. Ezekiel's theme is a walk through the decadence of Bombay's soul which began after the Second World War. Both have their purgatory of existence in the turpi- tude of sunken values. Both are searching for new insight in a world where new insight are only those of agony and frustration. The central image of "The Waste Land" is that of land blighted by a curse where crops do not grow and animals are cursed with sterility. "A Morning Walk" of Ezekiel resembles the journey of the protagonist in Eliot's poem to the chapel perilous through a parching and agoniz- ing area of horror and darkness where "one can neither stand nor lie or sit".

"Love Sonnet" depicts the pathetic case of a pair of lovers longing for privacy in the midst of a noisy crowded metropolis. The poet's total rejection of Indian noise, the irony of the Iranian restaurant instruction and the different disgusting scenes from Indian life depicted in 'In India' symbolize, in spite of their bantering tone, Ezekiel's derision for the values of a culture that grips him from all around.

Caught in the vortex of a soulless city the poet longs for salvation. His poetry becomes a perpetual quest for identity and commitment in a world of eroding indi-

visuality and lack of purpose. The poet expresses his dilemma thus, “always open but I cannot leave”. (Collected poems: The Room). The city like the woman on Bellasis Road fascinates and repels the poet. Like the fake Guru on its pavement, the city extends its unscrupulous hands to the unwary citizen. Thus in Ezekiel's poetry “the city being more than an image is transformed into a symbol of decomposed garbage, a space infected as also it is on a deeper level not a particular place in the large cosmos but a system of living shattered and corroded at the very core. The sapling of life with its freshness, vigour and innocence does not blossom here anymore”. (rahaman 54). Jussawalla says that, “Nissim Ezekiel's poems are the records of the moral aches and pain of a modern Indian in one of his own cities”. The poet who has gone through the travails of the city finds no alternate tabernacle of hope. This existential frustration is expressed in 'Enterprise'. Like 'A Morning Walk' and 'Entertainment' this poem is moulded out of the fallouts frustration in a “barbaric city”. it is an allegory of the pilgrimage theme with a suggestion of futility.

CONCLUSION:

As a true modernist poet, Ezekiel viewed poetry in close connection with society and emphasized man as the focal point in the universe. While developing the themes of urban wickedness and ugliness, love and marriage, family and human relationship, alienation and searches for the identity of the modern man, he advocates a cultural synthesis of the ancient and modern. Ezekiel establishes himself as a poet of urban environment and exposes the ills and wonds of urban civilization. One can find the modern urban life with its poverty and squalor and hypocrisy find a telling expression in his poems. He was so immersed in the life of his city Bombay, that he knew each and every aspect of life there. To him Bombay was the metaphor for the urban life in india and he genuinely attempted to balance diverse tension of urban culture. To show the attachment of Ezekiel to Bombay K.N. Daruwalla says,

He is basically an urban poet, the city spilling over into his verse not as cosmetic but as an organic growth.

As a true modern poet, he started to voice his own thought and opinion, his own experiences, which were the experiences of the every man. He broke away from the bounds of the tradition and voiced his feelings and experiences in his poetry. The modern poetry portrayed ordinaries of things and events, discovery of self, which was well understood by Ezekiel. Other modern characteristic shown by him were chiefly, his willingness to be a poet by choice, who continually worked to improve his art; the other characteristic are skepticism, restlessness and a feeling of alienation. Following the modern trend, Ezekiel thus tries to depict the harsh reality of modern and urban life, while presenting reality he, appears to be a stern realist. He has graphically painted in vivid picturesque words and phrases a vast gallery of portraits representing Indian urban life. Hence, he is a preacher and almost all the modern features of poetry find expression in his poetic creation.

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